

[East Valley Tribune](#)

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After Joe Little finished his Army tour of duty in the Vietnam War, he returned to the states to an uncertain future.

Though the Valley resident made several attempts at a university education, a severe back injury kept him from realizing a college degree.

"I couldn't get into the rhythm and was getting interrupted with all the surgeries I was having," Little said.

In addition to his physical restrictions, Little felt emotionally unprepared for school.

"You get on the college campus with all the students and it's intimidating," he said. "You feel out of place."

For nearly 30 years, Little couldn't find steady employment, laboring as an insurance salesman, a truck driver and a test driver for General Motors, among other things.

And he was never able to finish college - until he joined the Veterans Upward Bound program.

VUB is a federal Department of Education program run locally through Arizona State University that aims to get veterans into college by offering free remedial classes and extra guidance.

Little started taking classes in 1999 and, a few months later, was attending ASU en route to a bachelor's and then a master's degree in social work.

He now counsels at the Phoenix Veterans Center and, last month, capping a long struggle to find footing in the educational world, Little was honored for his achievements by the Council for Opportunity in Education in Washington, D.C., even receiving special congressional recognition from U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz.

Little says the path wasn't easy, but VUB pushed him to keep on the right track.

"There were times when I wanted to walk off," he said. "(VUB was) more of an inspiration than anything else. They wanted to see you achieve."

Veterans get GI Bill benefits that provide for education, but fewer than 20 percent take advantage of those benefits, said ASU's VUB director, Bob Mena.

Of those, he added, only about half finish their college program of study.

"They have the intelligence," Mena said. "They just don't have the background or sufficient educational proficiency to become successful."

VUB offers English, math and computer literacy classes - areas with which Mena said veterans, many of whom have been out of school for some years, have the most trouble.

Over the course of more than three decades in the Valley, the program has helped thousands of those veterans get into college - nearly 100 every year, said Marcus Wright, the program's recruitment and retention specialist.

Anyone who has served at least 180 days since 1955 and has not been dishonorably discharged can join, Wright said. But VUB has been mandated by the U.S. Department of Education to reach out to potential low-income veterans whose families don't have a tradition of higher education.

VUB offers day and night sessions Monday through Thursday, and students can start their training whenever they want, without the confines of semester limits.